DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 330 639 SO 030 466

AUTHOR Atherton, Herbert
TITLE Remarks of Herbert Atherton. to the National Bicentennial Leadership Conference .
INSTITUTION Commission on the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 8p.; Remarks given at National Bicentennial Leadership Conference (Washington, DC, September 21-22, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Citizenship Education; Civil Rights; *Constitutional History; Current Events; *National Organizations; Public Affairs Education; Social Studies; United States History
IDENTIFIERS *Bill Of Rights; United States Constitution

ABSTRACT

The text of a speech made by the Staff Director and Director of Education of the U.S. Bicentennial Commission, the paper presents an overview of the Commission's plans for the 1991 celebration of the Bicentennial of the Bill of Rights. "The Bill of Rights and Beyond," the theme of the celebration, conveys the idea that although the 200th anniversary of the Bill of Rights is the centerpiece of the commemoration, all the rights enjoyed under the U.S. Constitution are to be celebrated as well. The Bicentennial Commission plan for 1991 includes special events, a media campaign, a wide range of publications, two series of regional meetings and conventions, a continuation of on-going programs such as the Discretionary Grant Program, National Bicentennial Competition, Map Contest, and DAR Essay Contest, and new programs such as cosponsorship of 1991 National History Day's competitions on "Rights in History." (DB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED330639

National Bicentennial Leadership Conference
September 21-22, 1990

Remarks of
Herbert Atherton
Staff Director and Director of Education
U.S. Bicentennial Commission

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

SP 032 496

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

National Bicentennial Leadership Conference
September 21-22, 1990

Remarks of
Herbert Atherton
Staff Director and Director of Education
U. S. Bicentennial Commission

I knew when Jerry Browning told me that I would be speaking after Mrs. Enista that I would have a hard act to follow; I didn't realize until a few minutes ago how just how formidable that task was going to be. I am sure I speak on behalf of all present this morning in saying how much we appreciate Mrs. Enista's inspiring words and her sharing with us recollections that must not have been altogether easy to revisit.

All my life I have had an inveterate habit of seeing things in three parts. Perhaps this was the result of too many discussions of the nature of Divinity in Sunday School. In any event, as Caesar saw Gaul, I tend to see things in three parts.

So it was natural when I came to reflect upon the purposes and objectives of this national meeting to settle upon a trinity of objectives: (1) to engage ourselves, to become motivated to undertake the coming year's commemoration--as my children used to say, to "get psyched"; (2) to give those of us in the national leadership of the Bicentennial and as hosts of this conference an opportunity to outline our plans for the commemoration--our leadership role; (3) to give all participants in the meeting an opportunity to share information and explore new ideas.

My task this morning is to meet, at least in part, the second objective: to provide an overview of the Commission's plans for 1991 and thus to provide a bridge of sorts between this morning's words of inspiration and the practical and operational details of the workshops to follow.

Almost two years ago the Chairman of the Commission appointed an ad hoc advisory committee, chaired by Judge Frank Coffin of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit, to develop a set of recommendations for the commemoration of the Bill of Rights. This was a blue-ribbon committee, including in its body Professors Rodney Smolla of the William & Mary Institute of Bill of Rights Law, Jack Greene of Johns Hopkins University, Lois Schwoerer of George Washington University, and Kenneth Thompson of the University of Virginia; Erwin Griswold, the former Dean of Harvard Law School and Solicitor General of the United States; Judge Aubrey Robinson; and many others.

The Committee submitted its report in August of 1989. The report contained a number of both philosophical observations and specific recommendations. The report recommended that the Commission issue a "call to action" as a kind of mission statement for the nation to commemorate the Bill of Rights. It recommended that this anniversary should be primarily an occasion for education and secondarily (though still importantly) an occasion for celebration; that it should have an international as well as a domestic dimension; that it should concentrate upon programs of lasting rather than temporary impact, even if the latter might be worth more in terms of immediate publicity. Included in the Committee's report were an assortment of suggested programs and special activities, including a national planning meeting of the sort we have arranged here today.

In the months after receipt of the Coffin Committee Report the Commission and its staff worked on the development of a plan, which was considered and approved by the Commission earlier this year. Elements of the plan are included in the Special Report to the President (a copy of which is in the meeting packet) and, in some respects, in other recent publications such as the Resource Guide.

Our title and theme--"The Bill of Rights and Beyond"--was settled upon after much discussion. It conveys the idea that the 200th anniversary of the Bill of Rights is the centerpiece of the coming year's commemoration, but it is not the whole story. We are commemorating all of the rights enjoyed under our Constitution: including those contained in the subsequent Civil War and franchise amendments and, indeed, those in the original Constitution as well.

Our mission statement is contained in a "Call to Action" as the Committee recommended. It articulates a vision of what this commemoration should be about. The plan has several key elements, including special events, a media campaign, a wide range of publications (some of which are included in the meeting packet), two series of regional meetings and conventions, a continuation of on-going programs such as the Discretionary Grant Program, National Bicentennial Competition, Map Contest, and DAR Essay Contest, and new programs such as cosponsorship of National History Day's competitions next year on "Rights in History."

Obviously, we can't cover all these elements this morning. There will be an opportunity to discuss and learn more about most of them in the workshops. Let me say a few words, however, about some of the highlights that might not be addressed later.

We have begun discussions with the Congressional leadership about the possibility of a special Joint Session of Congress sometime early next year to initiate the commemoration. The Commissioner of the National Football League has generously donated free air time in the pre-game show of next year's Super Bowl for a TV spot from the Commission, and, as well, a full page in the official game book; work on these advertisements has begun. The heads of the other major professional sports organizations will be contacted in the near future to explore similar opportunities. I should add that McDonalds Corporation has agreed to develop trayliners on the Bill of Rights for use in all its outlets during November and December of 1991.

We are currently exploring several special event opportunities for Constitution Week 1991, possibly in collaboration with other organizations. The Commission will be sponsoring a national "Teach About" the Bill of Rights and Beyond, as a culmination of our activities in the autumn of 1991. Its centerpiece will be a large poster with illustrations and suggested learning activities for schools. The program is being developed with the assistance of representatives from several educational associations and outstanding individual educators like Betty Debnam. That program--and indeed all our programs--will conclude in December 1991 with an appropriate closing ceremony on or about December 15th, probably here in Washington.

It needs be said that our plans are still developing, especially those furthest out. We must cope with many uncertainties, not the least of which is the current Federal budget crisis. Today's gathering is part of the planning process; it should enable us to further refine our plans--and yours as well. This is, as we all are aware, a collaborative effort. The Commission's programs ultimately depend upon you and the many others across the country who make them a reality.

Historians and theologians (and the Biblical prophets of old before them) speak of certain periods in history which seem pregnant with meaning and special significance: points in time when, by chance, fate, or Providence, there appears to be an unusual conjunction of forces, a momentousness, a sense of openness and possibility almost Biblical in its dimensions.

Obviously, we don't have the perspective to say for sure, but there are some interesting signs which suggest that we are living in such an age. It is certainly a time of interesting coincidences. As we have celebrated the bicentennial of our Constitution and Bill of Rights, the British commemorated the tercentenary of their Glorious Revolution and their own Bill of Rights, the French the bicentennial of their Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, the United Nations the fortieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Germans (interestingly enough), the fortieth anniversary of their constitution.

The bicentennial years have provided an interesting, if not implausible coincidence of historical remembrances, which connect with each other in many ways. But the most intriguing coincidences have to do with what's going on in the contemporary world. Who would have guessed four or five years ago, at the outset of our bicentennial, what changes would have taken place in countries long viewed as the very nemesis of the ideals our bicentennial stands for--such bizarre, surreal coincidences as a Statue of Liberty in Tiananmen Square, a McDonalds in Moscow, a former President of the United States gone to the Kremlin to embrace the Soviet premier and endorse his government's policies.

Who would have guessed a few years ago that the most eager market for copies of our Pocket Constitution would not be in the American hinterland or in Western Europe, but in places like Warsaw, Budapest, and Prague, and that it would be a President of Czechoslovakia who paid eloquent tribute to our Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights. The times seems very strange to those of us who grew up and lived in a world defined by Winston Churchill's Iron Curtain speech of forty-four years ago.

What Harold Macmillan called the "winds of change" have done, in a sense, what no bicentennial celebration could do in calling to mind the meaning and significance of the legacy we've been commemorating these last few years. They have reminded us in a most compelling way of the fact that ideas do have consequences, that the ideals of the Founding Fathers are, after all, as relevant today as they were two hundred years ago.

Events seems to be overtaking a great many old assumptions and beliefs, but they also confirm others. They have brought about a period in history, a point in time when past, present, and future seem especially close together, especially interconnected, a time when the breathtaking sweep of present changes point not only to a future of exciting new possibilities in the world's political order, but to the past as well, a past which should have special meaning for us as Americans.

All of which says that this is a grand time in which to celebrate the bicentennial of our Bill of Rights, and I, for one, am looking forward to it.